



**The Rocketbelt Caper: 50-PAGE SAMPLER**  
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## Prologue

It was just past midday on a January Sunday in 1995, and Brad Barker was getting nervous. It was warm and dry, but grey clouds were gathering overhead. A light breeze whipped at the long grass that ran along the edges of the runway. The water in the airport's sea-lane rippled and mirrored the dull sky. Barker strode out to the runway in white sneakers, jeans and a denim shirt, a cell phone clipped to his belt, and a pair of unnecessary sunglasses perched on his nose. Around him, a handful of colleagues busied themselves with preparations. This was supposed to be the beginning of the dream, but just one mistake could turn it into a nightmare. And what the hell would he do then?

He'd tested it, of course, as much as you could without strapping a man into it and blasting him into the air. Now it was time to do just that. Barker looked at his pilot, bespectacled and slightly out of shape, wearing a white helmet and a jumpsuit. Barker was sure he had the right man for the job. Bill Suitor was nothing if not experienced. He'd flown these things hundreds of times before. Suitor would not have agreed to do this unless he thought it would work. And there was no reason to think it wouldn't. That's what Barker told himself as he strapped Suitor into the Rocketbelt 2000.

It had taken five long years and several hundred thousand dollars to reach this point. Was it an obsession? You could say so, as the idea of building a rocketbelt had dominated Barker's thoughts ever since he first saw the amazing device, in a James Bond movie, as a nine-year-old boy. There had been sacrifices made, friendships lost, legal wrangles, and a bunch of other stuff he didn't want to think about right now. It had been quite an ordeal, but that was all in the past. Barker slapped Suitor on the back and retreated to a safe distance.

The pilot offered a thumbs-up, and there was a silent moment of anticipation. Barker studied his 'Pretty Bird' - its lovingly polished fuel tanks, curved exhaust pipes and control handlebars he'd worked so hard to put together. It was a unique device, but it looked oddly familiar, being as it was the realization of a childhood fantasy. Then Suitor twisted open the throttle. The test flight began.

It was the noise that hit the small band of onlookers first. A high-pitched wail - an explosive scream of superheated steam, as loud as a jet engine. It was an assault on the eardrums, like having an aerosol fired

into each ear. And this from a device not much bigger than a portable vacuum cleaner, strapped to the pilot's back like a hiking rucksack.

A white cloud of steam erupted from the exhausts, kicking up a swirl of dust around the pilot's feet. And then - in a defining moment for Barker - pilot and machine lifted into the air. There were no wings and no strings. This man was flying solely via the power of the rocketbelt.

Suitor hovered for a moment, a couple of feet from the runway, then maneuvered out over the sea-lane, blasting a spray of water into the air. He banked into a graceful circular flight path, increasing his altitude to ten, fifteen, thirty feet. Barker watched the figure of the rocketbelt pilot silhouetted against the sky, his shadow becoming increasingly longer on the runway below. It worked. It really worked. And all Barker could think was, when do I get a turn?

Fuel was limited, and the flight needed to be short. So Suitor arced back towards his starting point, and began his descent. The landing was feather-light and perfect. The pilot bounced on tiptoes, steadied his feet, then offered Barker a salute.

'Yeah!' whooped Barker. He rushed over to congratulate the grinning Suitor, and said, 'Let's fuel it up and go again.' So they did, and the second test flight was just as successful as the first.

Then, on the third flight, things began to go wrong. In fact, if the truth were known, things had been going wrong for quite some time. They would get a lot worse before this whole sorry affair was over. And it was all because of one of the most sought after and revered machines in the history of flight. It was all because of the amazing rocketbelt. Blame Buck Rogers, and James Bond, and Commando Cody, and the Jetsons. It was their fault that everybody wanted a rocketbelt. The iconic device was a ubiquitous feature in twentieth century science fiction. It became pivotal to the accepted vision of the future. Eminent science writers like Isaac Asimov confidently predicted that, by the year 2000, the citizens of Earth would be zipping about through the air using rocketbelts. That never quite came to pass. Brilliant inventors did build a small number of working rocketbelts, and a handful of pioneering pilots got to fly them through the sky. But, for most of those who coveted rocketbelts, the device remained tantalizingly out of reach - a technological holy grail.

Then Brad Barker and two of his buddies got sick of waiting for science fiction to become reality. They formed a fractious partnership and set out on an ambitious quest to build their very own rocketbelt. Perhaps the least incredible thing about their story is that they actually succeeded

in building and flying a working rocketbelt - in fact the very best rocketbelt that had ever been built. Then the incredible dream turned into an almost unbelievable nightmare.

For now, Barker was watching his rocketbelt fly through the air, grey skies closing in, wind brushing the back of his neck. Suitor circled over the sea-lane, and swung back around to the runway, but he came in too fast. Much too fast. His feet clipped the tarmac and flipped him around, hard onto the ground. The rocketbelt hit the runway at pace, too, with a sound like a car hitting a lamppost. The pilot cut the throttle and lay still on the tarmac. Miraculously, Suitor was unhurt, if a little shaken. Barker rushed onto the runway to check out the damage.

'The thing damn near killed me,' said Suitor, crawling to his knees and unstrapping himself from the device.

'You damn near killed my rocketbelt,' said Barker. He ran his hands along the dented stainless steel he'd spent so long polishing. Goddamn it, this would take months to repair. And it was not as if Barker didn't already have enough problems to deal with.

A few spots of rain began to land on the runway. Barker hoisted up the rocketbelt and loaded it into his trailer. He would have to put his plans for a public demonstration flight on hold for a while. Then, once the belt was repaired and public flights were arranged, the money would begin to roll in. Finally, he would be able to forget about his troubles. That's what Brad Barker reckoned. In fact, Brad Barker's troubles had barely even started.

# Chapter 1

## The Bell Rocketbelt

The Edwards Air Force Base is located in the middle of the Mojave desert in Southern California, hundreds of miles from anywhere else, and surrounded by nothing but sand and dry lake beds. In 1947, then called the Muroc Base, it was the perfect place for the Bell Aircraft Company to test their radical new supersonic jet, named the X-1. The bullet-shaped, bright orange X-1 was powered by four rocket engines, and built to withstand 18-times the force of gravity.

The desert test flights were designed to push the jet up to and past Mach 1, a velocity of approximately 760 miles per hour - the speed of sound. Over several months from July 1947, Captain Chuck Yeager pushed the X-1 nearer and nearer to the target velocity. The jet was launched from the bomb bay of a B-29 Superfortress and glided free for a few moments before its rocket engines were fired. Its heavy fuel consumption allowed the rockets to run for just a few minutes, after which the X-1 glided to a landing on a nearby dry lake. Each flight saw the speed of the jet increased by only a tiny increment in order to maximize safety.

By the time of the ninth flight, on the morning of 14 October 1947, the X-1 team was ready to push for Mach .98. The jet was launched as normal, and Yeager pushed toward his target speed. But, at Mach .965, the meter oscillated wildly and shot off the scale. At exactly 10.18am, the plane disappeared from view. Ground staff heard a huge noise like a thunderclap. At first, they feared Yeager and the X-1 had been lost. In fact, what they had heard was the world's first sonic boom. Yeager had broken the sound barrier. For 20 seconds the X-1 travelled faster than the speed of sound - it was the world's first supersonic jet, and Yeager was the fastest man in the world.

Key components of the X-1 were reaction control thrusters. These miniature rocket engines, mounted on the tail and wingtips, helped the pilot control the jet at high altitudes, where the thin air hampered

aerodynamic flight characteristics. The thrusters have since been used to control maneuverability during space exploration. They were invented by Bell propulsion engineer Wendell Moore, from Canton, Ohio. Moore joined Bell in 1945 and later became the company's assistant chief engineer. (The Bell Aircraft Company, founded in 1930 by Lawrence Bell, later became Bell Aerosystems, and then Bell Aerospace.)

In 1953, while working on the X-plane project, Moore considered strapping his miniature rockets to a human being. 'I could stick two of those on a man's back and make him fly like Buck Rogers,' he told a colleague. Moore explained his idea by drawing a plan in the desert sand with a pointed stick, and then sketched a design on a pad showing valves and gauges and high-pressure lines, and a man with a rocket pack attached to his back.

Moore called his invention the Small Rocket Lift Device (SRLD). The basic principle of the design involved gas being forced at high pressure through downward-facing exhaust tubes to generate lift. In order to test his idea, he built a nitrogen-powered rig manufactured from steel tubing, with two exhaust tubes fitted with rocket nozzles. The device was tethered to safety cables, and fed by a high-pressure hose, with gas flow controlled from the ground by a technician.

Moore tested the nitrogen rig himself, inside a large Bell hangar. At the first test flight on 17 December 1957, the 54th anniversary of the Wright brothers' first flight, Moore, with a helmet pushed over his typical 1950s flattop haircut, offered a thumbs-up signal to a fellow engineer, who opened up the thrust control.

With his Bell colleagues holding onto the safety tethers, Moore lifted into the air and hovered four inches from the ground, wobbling around in a small circle. Further test flights pushed the ability of the device. Refinements were made with the help of Moore's colleague Jim Powell and Bell cameraman Tom Lennon, both of whom tried out the rig to help iron out stability problems. It was Lennon who spotted that, in order to keep the device under control, the pilot should keep his feet together. By 1959, Moore had achieved a stable flight 15 feet above the ground.

Meanwhile, the US Army's Transport Research and Engineering Command (TRECOT) became very keen on developing a working rocket pack. Having been closely involved with Thiokol's aborted Project Grasshopper, TRECOT turned to the Aerojet General Corporation, another company with experience in rocket propulsion. In 1960, Aerojet engineer Richard Peoples made a successful tethered test flight of their

device - the Aeropak. But the Aeropak project stalled, and TRECOM's attentions shifted to Bell and Wendell Moore.

TRECOM contracted Bell to 'build a Small Rocket Lift Device and demonstrate its feasibility in manned free flight'. Wendell Moore was to be Bell's technical director for the project. The budget was set at just \$150,000, so Moore recycled parts from previous aircraft and spacecraft, like the Mercury space capsules. Working at the Bell Aerosystems plant in Buffalo, New York, Moore radically improved his design. He also re-named the device. Now the SRLD became known as the 'Rocketbelt'.

The Bell Rocketbelt consists of three tanks fitted to a form-fitting fiberglass corset. At the sides, two downward-facing pipes are connected to rocket nozzles. At the front, handle grip controls for throttle and steering are fitted to handlebars that run under the operator's arms.

The rocketbelt is powered by a throttleable rocket motor that runs on hydrogen peroxide - an alkaline chemical commonly used in bleaches, disinfectants, dyes and antiseptics. Hydrogen peroxide ( $H_2O_2$ ) is a clear, dense liquid - basically water with an extra molecule of oxygen. Household bleaches and antiseptics contain around a three percent concentration of  $H_2O_2$ . Rocketbelt fuel contains around a 90 percent concentration. At such high concentration, and high volatility,  $H_2O_2$  makes for a very effective - if very dangerous - rocket fuel.

On the rocketbelt, the middle tank contains nitrogen, and the outer tanks contain  $H_2O_2$ . The nitrogen acts as a pressurizing gas. A valve is opened, and the nitrogen is released into the fuel tanks, forcing the hydrogen peroxide at high pressure over a catalyst bed of fine-mesh silver screens. A reaction takes place and steam is produced. The steam is then fired out of the rocket nozzles at high velocity, creating thrust, and allowing the rocketbelt to fly.

Wendell Moore was no relation to Thomas Moore, the inventor of the Jet Vest, but the two men did correspond, swapping thoughts and ideas. Wendell invited Thomas to visit Bell, and Thomas was said to be delighted to see the working rocketbelt, despite the fact that the Army had failed to pursue or patent any of his own ideas.

The first rocketbelt test flight took place on 29 December 1960. Tethered into a safety harness, Wendell Moore piloted the rocketbelt into the air for several erratic seconds and made a series of rudimentary maneuvers using the new control system. Over a succession of further tethered tests, the Bell team troubleshot and gradually improved the rocketbelt. Then, on the 20th test flight, something went wrong.

During that flight in February 1961, the rocketbelt snagged on a safety tether. Moore was unaware of the mishap until the tether snapped, and both pilot and belt fell eight feet to the ground. Moore badly fractured his knee and would never fly his rocketbelt again. It would be another Bell employee who would attempt the first free flight.

Harold 'Hal' Graham was a 27-year-old science graduate from Buffalo. He had been working for Bell as a test engineer for just over a year when he was selected to pilot the rocketbelt. It would be Graham's first taste of flying. He was not a registered pilot, and the only machine he had previous experience of driving was a car. He was, however, a rocketbelt fan, having grown up with Buck Rogers comics and Commando Cody serials. When Bell began to ask around for a volunteer to fly the rocketbelt he had no hesitation in applying for the job.

Graham's first tethered flight took place two weeks after Moore's accident, in March 1961. These flights took place in a large aircraft hangar. The rocketbelt was suspended from the ceiling, and small amounts of thrust were used to generate moderate lift. 36 tethered flights later, it was time for the safety ropes to come off.

The very first untethered rocketbelt flight took place at seven in the morning on 20 April 1961. A 20-man Bell crew gathered at an empty clearing near the Bell plant on Buffalo's Niagara Falls Boulevard and opposite the Niagara Falls Municipal Airport, which had been specially closed for 30 minutes. The crew ran through a detailed checklist in preparation for the flight. Then Graham, wearing a black rubber suit, white helmet, work boots, and goggles, released the throttle in a short burst to check the propulsion. All seemed fine. Again he released the throttle, this time successfully lifting the belt around 18 inches from the ground in a thick cloud of steam, and piloted it in a straight line at a speed of around ten miles per hour. The noise was incredible - an explosive roar of gas as loud as a pneumatic drill. And visibility was poor - almost zero according to Graham - due to condensation created by the rocket exhaust. On the first free rocketbelt flight Hal Graham flew for 13 seconds and covered a distance of 112 feet - eight feet less than the Wright Brothers had covered in their inaugural flight. It was nevertheless a thoroughly triumphant debut.

Following the success of the test flight, Bell executives were keen to unveil the remarkable device to the public. But Wendell Moore was insistent that there should be many more tests before that happened. He wanted to iron out safety and reliability problems before any public

demonstration. So a succession of secret test flights took place at the Niagara Falls Airport, and on a golf course at the Youngstown Country Club in New York. The tests saw Hal Graham perform turns, negotiate obstacles and pilot the belt over hills and streams. Finally, after 28 free flights, Moore was satisfied enough to agree to a public demonstration.

The first public rocketbelt flight took place at Fort Eustis, Virginia, on 8 June 1961 at a TRECOM demonstration of new technologies. TRECOM officials and scores of press reporters gathered on the Fort Eustis runway as the Bell crew helped Graham get kitted out in his protective suit and fitted into the belt. Because the rocketbelt corset was rigid and form-fitting it required something of a squeeze to get Graham into it. Safety checks were performed, and the crowd stood back. Then Graham took off with a huge roar. Light bulbs flashed and film reels rolled as Graham piloted the rocketbelt into the air, legs swinging below him. Conditions were good, and the steam from the exhaust stirred up only a light cloud of dust from the runway. Against a backdrop of Air Force planes, Graham maneuvered the rocketbelt over a truck, and higher into the sky. He flew to around 15 feet, and then descended, bouncing slightly as he landed on his feet. Graham then offered a salute.

After removing his fire suit, Graham was mobbed by the press. Microphones were thrust into his face, and pencils jotted down every word he said. Bell officials handed out press releases which began, 'Harold M Graham is believed to be the first man to fly with back-carried rocket equipment.'

The story made the front pages across the US. The New York Times headline read, 'Portable army rocket propels man 150 feet in 11-second test flight.' Life magazine said, 'Graham was strapped to a hydrogen peroxide-fuelled rocket. The Army hopes it will someday make all foot soldiers look like Buck Rogers.'

One week later, Graham demonstrated the rocketbelt on the front lawn of the Pentagon in Washington DC in front of a huge crowd of military personnel. An estimated 3,000 Pentagon staff left their desks to view the demonstration. In the first of two flights, Graham took off in a swirl of blades of grass, negotiated a parked army sedan, and flew for almost 150 feet before touching down safely.

Public reaction to the rocketbelt was stunning. It seemed everyone wanted to see the flying rocketman - a real life sci-fi hero with his amazing rocketbelt. In October 1961, Graham, Moore and the Bell crew travelled to Fort Bragg in North Carolina to participate in another military

demonstration, this time as part of a display of combat readiness. The demonstration was performed in front of a notable guest of honor - President John F Kennedy.

Graham, wearing a US Army uniform, took off from an amphibious landing vehicle, flew across a pond in a spray of water, and landed 14 seconds later on a sand embankment in front of JFK. Graham remembered to salute but forgot to depressurize the belt in the excitement of the moment, although he managed to remain on the ground. 'Mr Kennedy was described by an Army Officer sitting near him as "wide eyed and open mouthed, just like a kid",' reported the Buffalo Evening News.

The public interest and publicity surrounding Graham and the rocketbelt generated much correspondence. Letters requesting public appearances began to flood the Bell offices. One man wrote to Bell requesting the use of the rocketbelt in order to claim a \$1 million treasure trove that, he claimed, he could only reach with the use of the belt. Suspicious Bell executives turned the request down.

Although Hal Graham could now proficiently fly the rocketbelt, he was still not a registered pilot. In November 1961 he decided to do something about that. He began to take flying lessons, and qualified for his pilot's license in July 1962. That year also saw the debut of the B-Series rocketbelt. The new belt was engineered to reduce weight, and, as rocketbelt pilot, Graham was kitted out in a brand new bright yellow flight suit.

But Hal Graham's short career as a rocketbelt pilot was coming to an end. During an ill-fated demonstration at Cape Canaveral, Graham fell 22 feet, landed on his head, and was knocked unconscious. He survived the crash, but decided to get out of the rocketbelt business. Graham made 83 untethered rocketbelt flights during his time at Bell, but he left the company in 1962 to pursue his new love of flying traditional aircraft. He set up his own one-man, one-plane charter flight company in Crossville, Tennessee.

After Graham departed, a new team of four pilots comprising Robert Courter Jr, Peter Kedzierski, John Spencer and Gordon Yaeger flew the Bell Rocketbelt. Courter was a former Air Force fighter pilot and a veteran of the Korean War, and Kedzierski was a 17-year-old high school graduate in technical engineering and a keen glider pilot. John Spencer was Bell's chief test pilot and had trained with Chuck Yeager, while Gordon Yaeger (not to be confused with Chuck Yeager) was a Bell technician

and a father of six. The Bell team took the belt all over the US, to South America, and to Europe, and made demonstrations in front of hundreds of thousands of spectators.

Bell had proved the principle of a rocketbelt could work, but so far all of the rocketbelt pilots had been technicians or pilots. It needed to prove to the US Army that the belt could be piloted by non-technical soldiers with minimal training. Bell needed to find an average kid with no flight experience and teach him to fly the rocketbelt. That average kid was 19-year-old William P Suitor, and he was about to become the most famous rocketbelt pilot in the world - a real-life rocketman.

## Chapter 2

### The Oil Field Incident

It was early one morning in 1990 when the car arrived at the oil field near Houston, Texas, and hurtled along a dust track past the wellheads and drilling machinery.

Among the passengers in the car was 35-year-old Brad Barker, a former insurance salesman from Illinois. Barker had movie star looks and a charismatic personality. But those who had crossed his path knew that behind his handsome and charming façade was a volatile temper. He was a complicated man, they said, a regular churchgoer liable to outbursts of violence. Barker had been recruited to retrieve equipment from the oil field after a dispute. On his lap lay a baseball bat. It was clear Barker was not there to negotiate.

Bradley Wayne Barker was tanned and in shape, with dark eyes and thick brown hair. He was most often seen in jeans and an unbuttoned polo shirt, his hair carefully swept back. Barker had lost his father as a young boy, but remained close to his mother and brother. He was a wanderer, and rarely stayed for long in any one place or job. But if there was anywhere he called home it was Houston, a gritty and humid big city dominated by oil excavation and space exploration.

Amid the Bayou City's contrasting cityscape of skyscrapers and waterways, black gold drove the economy and the NASA Space Center drew tourism. International finance, computer technology and science research also prospered in the area. A culturally diverse population had been attracted by Houston's reputation for opportunity and innovation. The city seemed to be continuously growing and changing, but cowboys still strode along sidewalks, and the smell of barbequed steak still drifted reassuringly from restaurant doorways.

Barker had driven to the oil field on behalf of his close friend, rocket-belt pilot Kinnie Gibson. The pair met in 1975, when a 20-year-old suited-up Barker walked into Houston's Central National Bank looking

for a job. He was interviewed by Gibson - then just 19, stuck in a desk job, and yet to fulfill his dream of becoming a professional stuntman. The pair clicked immediately. They were almost the same age, shared many interests, and found it easy to get along. Barker aced the interview, and the pair began to work side by side.

Both Barker and Gibson had been drawn to Houston's high-rise business district by a booming job market, but neither was particularly interested in financial work. They were in it for the money, and compensated for spending their weekdays in an office by spending their weekends outdoors - travelling, skydiving and flying planes. Barker bought a small airplane, a Cessna 210 Centurion, and the two men flew it out of the nearby League City airport. They partied together at Houston bars, drank, met girls, and happily enjoyed the best years of their lives. They also went through defining moments together - they acted as best man at each other's weddings, and their sons were born within 24 hours of each other. Barker and Gibson were best friends, and it seemed nothing could change that.

By the beginning of the 1980s, both men had drifted away from selling insurance. Houston's business district was no longer the draw it had once been. Oil prices were beginning to fall, and Houston's much-hyped economy was starting to dwindle. The fourth-largest city in the US was about to experience an exodus in its population.

Gibson was one of those that left. He wanted to be active, not stuck behind a desk. He loved extreme sports and flying, and wanted to make a living from those types of activities. He decided he wanted to be a stuntman. Gibson moved to Los Angeles and set about finding a way into professional stunt work. Then he was offered the chance to fly the Tyler Rocketbelt. Gibson became a rocketman.

Barker stayed in Houston and moved between various jobs, in the oil industry, in auto shops, and in the nightclub business, none of which paid as well or as regularly as his old insurance job. He knew he could probably have followed Gibson into stunt work if only the opportunity had arisen. Instead, he enviously watched the progress of his best friend, and made sure he kept in touch.

In 1981, Gibson invited Barker to watch him fly the rocketbelt at a demonstration near Mexico City. He knew Barker had fallen on lean times since leaving the insurance business, so he offered to pay his airfare. Barker accepted and flew south of the border, where he spent a

week with Gibson and the rocketbelt. And he immediately became enchanted with the amazing flying machine.

In fact, Barker had been interested in rocketbelts ever since seeing the opening sequence of Thunderball in a local cinema back in 1965. He recalled that as a seminal moment in his life.

'I was nine years old, in a little town in Illinois,' he said. 'My father had been killed in a car accident about eight months before that, and I just remember being a depressed little kid. Then I saw the rocketbelt in the theatre, and I just remember being fascinated with it.'

After the week in Mexico, Barker returned to Houston, and continued to move between jobs. But he never forgot about the rocketbelt. Then his marriage fell apart, and there was no longer anything left for him in Houston. Barker packed a bag and left the Lone Star State for the Golden State.

In California, Barker hooked up with Gibson and was given a job helping to maintain the rocketbelt. Barker was technically proficient, as a result of experience gained in his variety of jobs, and he quickly learnt how the belt was prepared and operated. Gibson had Barker help him repair the belt after the accident in Philadelphia. But for help building a new H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> distillation lab Gibson turned to another friend, Larry Stanley.

Thomas Laurence Stanley was an aeronautics buff from Sugar Land - a Houston suburb named for its Imperial Sugar factory. He met Barker and Gibson while skydiving at the League City airport in the 1970s. Dark-haired with a chunky moustache, Stanley was an entrepreneur who was always looking for original ways to make money. His family owned an oil field, and the wealth it generated allowed him to dabble in businesses involving his key interests of computers and aeronautics.

Stanley was ten years older than Barker and eleven years older than Gibson, and never became as close to the pair as they were to each other. Stanley liked to ski but, unlike outdoor types Barker and Gibson, he wasn't particularly athletic. Despite their differences, the three men still became friends. Barker trusted Stanley enough to loan him his Cessna plane on numerous occasions. And Gibson invited Stanley to watch him fly the rocketbelt, and also formed a hot-air balloon business with him, referred to by Gibson as one of the biggest and most lucrative in the world. But the balloon business didn't last long. After it deflated, Stanley headed back to his family's oil field.

Then Barker and Stanley fell out. Barker was very fond of his Cessna, a turbo-charged aircraft originally worth as much as \$180,000. In 1986,

Barker claimed that the plane disappeared while on loan to Stanley. Barker was unable to locate either the Cessna or Stanley, so he contacted the authorities. According to Barker, an FBI Agent called on the telephone the next day and told him, 'Your airplane is probably at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico with a load of pot on it.'

According to Barker, the Agent referred to Stanley as being 'a known drug trafficker and smuggler' who had been 'investigated by every drug enforcement agency on the planet.' There is no available record of Stanley ever being charged with, or being investigated for, drug offences. Whether the drug claim was true or not, Barker said the FBI's hands were tied regarding the plane.

'They really couldn't do much,' said Barker. 'If I had never let him use the plane it wouldn't have been a problem, but because I had loaned it to him in the past it was basically my word against his.'

As it turned out, Barker's plane wasn't at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. It was in a hangar in Seattle, Washington. According to Barker, Stanley had added a long-range fuel tank and made other modifications to the Cessna. The implication from Barker was that the bigger fuel tank had been fitted to allow drug trafficking trips to South America. There was an outstanding bill of \$30,000 tied to the plane, the consequence of which was that the cash-strapped Barker couldn't afford to keep it. He was reluctantly forced to sell his prized airplane.

'When the thing was finally sold,' said Barker, 'the money that was brought in was used to pay off the outstanding bill.'

So Barker was left with nothing. He had lost his plane, and he figured Stanley owed him the value of it. But Stanley was nowhere to be found. Almost four years would go by before Barker would see his former friend again.

Gibson and Stanley also fell out. Gibson had agreed to invest several thousand dollars in the Stanley family's oil field in return for 50 percent of the profits. But there was a disagreement, and Gibson never saw any return. According to Stanley, Gibson failed to meet the terms of a contract the pair had drawn up, and the contract was terminated. Stanley and Gibson began to feud.

In early 1990, Barker was working on the rocketbelt in Los Angeles while Gibson travelled to the Philippines to do some stunt work on a movie. Shortly after Gibson left, Barker received a tearful phone call from Gibson's wife, Sheri. According to Sheri, Stanley had broken into Gibson's storage facility in Houston and stolen some equipment related

to the rocketbelt. Sheri said Stanley had told her not to bring anybody out to try to retrieve the equipment, or else, he had said, 'somebody's gonna get hurt.'

Despite Stanley's warning, Barker immediately flew out to Houston and called up a friend, a black belt karate instructor called Rob Fisher who once worked at a nightclub Barker had managed. Then Barker, Fisher and Sheri Gibson drove out to the oil field. Kinnie Gibson's two brothers followed them out in a second car. Gibson was a good friend who had done a lot for Barker. Stanley was anything but. There was no way Barker was going to let Stanley screw Gibson over.

One of the oil field's hired hands, Bernie Robinson, watched Barker's car approach in a cloud of dust, and stepped forward as it slowed to a halt. Then the doors flew open and Barker and Fisher burst out. Robinson was a former Navy Seal, and he'd been warned by Stanley to be ready for trouble. According to Barker, Robinson swung at Fisher and then tried to make a dash for his car, where he kept a loaded pistol, but, Barker claimed, 'Rob went into his karate routine and, in literally three or four seconds, just beat the shit out of this Navy Seal.'

Then Kinnie Gibson's brothers showed up. According to Robinson, who said he did not throw a punch before being knocked to the ground, three of the men held him down while Barker stood over him with a baseball bat. Then, Robinson claimed, Barker lifted the bat into the air and brought it crashing down on his legs.

'Where's Larry Stanley?' asked Barker.

Robinson could only groan with pain.

Barker whacked him again with the bat. 'Where's Larry Stanley?'

'He isn't here,' said Robinson.

'That's a shame,' said Barker. 'I'm very upset with Larry Stanley, and I'd like to hit him some.'

It seemed Stanley was again going to prove elusive. Then a car pulled up, and out stepped the man himself. Stanley spotted Sheri Gibson, and began to argue with her. He didn't realize she had brought friends. Then Barker stepped into view.

'Stanley,' said Barker, 'I'm gonna ask you one time where Kinnie's equipment is, and, if you don't tell me, you're not going to like what happens.'

Stanley looked at Barker, and the baseball bat, and said, 'I'll take you there.'

Barker followed Stanley to a nearby storage facility and recovered all of the equipment without further incident. Oddly, Barker said he did not mention the Cessna and the related \$30,000 debt, although this was the first time the two men had met in the four years since the plane had gone missing. Instead, Barker quietly packed up the equipment and took it back to California.

Later that day, Barker took a phone call from Kinnie Gibson in the Philippines.

'I love you brother,' said Gibson. 'I can't tell you how much I appreciate you getting my stuff back.'

Gibson would not always regard Barker with such fondness.

Still based in Los Angeles, Barker continued to work with Gibson on his rocketbelt. Gibson won a lucrative contract to fly the belt in front of hundreds of thousands of music fans on pop star Michael Jackson's 'Bad' tour. At the end of every performance, Gibson switched places with Jackson and blasted into the air, creating the illusion that the pop star was flying from the stage. Gibson was paid \$25,000 plus expenses for each flight, and he made almost \$1 million from the full Jackson tour. Gibson also won a contract to fly the rocketbelt at twenty different events at the Disney World theme park in Orlando, Florida.

In the summer of 1990, Gibson was preparing for a Disney World performance when he accidentally damaged the rocketbelt. He was performing his usual checks on the device, but was unaware that a high level of gas pressure had built up in the throttle valve. He unscrewed the cap, and the trapped pressure fired a piston out of the valve at high speed. The piston shot over Gibson's shoulder and lodged in the wall behind him. Gibson was unharmed, although shocked, but the piston was severely damaged.

According to Gibson, the six-inch long throttle valve was the key to the rocketbelt's secret design. There were no spare parts for the Tyler belt, and the valve could not be repaired in Orlando. So Gibson asked Barker to hurry the valve up to Houston, to be machined by specialists there, and return it before the performance the next day.

Barker took a flight to Houston, fully aware that he had in his possession a crucial and valuable piece of the rocketbelt. So crucial and valuable that Barker decided to measure and record the throttle valve's dimensions. Then he had the valve repaired, flew back to Orlando, and returned it to Gibson in time for the performance. The Disney World flight went ahead as planned, and Gibson remained unaware of best friend's

keen interest in the valve. If the throttle valve was the key, then Barker had just unlocked the secret of the rocketbelt.

# Chapter 3

## The Test Flight

With Larry Stanley temporarily out of the picture, Brad Barker and Joe Wright continued to test the rocketbelt with Bill Suitor. The first untethered RB-2000 test flight took place behind Wright's Car Audio Plus building on 21 January 1995.

Tethered tests had shown that the rocketbelt could fly and be maneuvered, but there was no way of knowing how reliable the belt would be when free of the safety ropes and harness. Tethered flights had only allowed the belt to reach an altitude of a couple of feet. From that height, a fall was unlikely to do serious damage to the pilot or the rocketbelt, but this free flight would see the rocketbelt fly at an altitude of over ten feet. A fall from that height could be fatal. There was no margin for error. Nothing could go wrong.

Suitor, wearing a white jumpsuit and helmet, just as he had done at the Olympics in 1984, walked into position with the rocketbelt on his back. The bright sun cast long shadows against the white-washed walls of the audio shop. A car alarm rang out in the distance. Other than that, there was silence. Call it nervous anticipation, but Barker and Wright were uncommonly quiet as they watched from a safe distance, the fate of their precious rocketbelt in the hands of a man in a jumpsuit.

Suitor briefly released the throttle, creating a small amount of thrust that bounced him up onto his tiptoes. There was a pause. Then he released the throttle again, slightly longer this time, allowing him to lift clear of the ground by several inches, pirouette for a few seconds, and land. It was a noisy, thrilling sight. So far so good.

A second attempt saw Suitor rise six feet from the ground, and maneuver in a small circle for a good ten seconds. After refueling, Suitor twisted the throttle, lifted into the air, and moved in a larger circle. Then the belt was refueled again, for a last tentative test. Suitor released the

throttle again and soared to around ten feet above the ground, piloting the belt in a loop, and landing safely 16 seconds later.

This was a very encouraging start and, for the moment, Brad Barker and Joe Wright could exchange smiles. But it was only a start. The initial tests, although cautious, had been successful. Now it was time to throw caution to the wind.

The first test flight that would really assess the capabilities of the RB-2000 took place on the following day, 22 January 1995, at Hooks Airport in Houston. The weather wasn't ideal. Grey clouds were gathering overhead, and a breeze whipped around the runway. The area was deserted but for Brad Barker, Joe Wright, Bill Suitor, and two or three friends who had come along to watch and videotape the event. Larry Stanley, not unexpectedly, had not been invited.

The air was full of excitement rather than tension. This was the culmination of a five-year dream. A lot of hard work and an awful lot of money had gone into this project. It is unlikely Barker gave much of a thought to his shattered friendship with Stanley as he helped Suitor, again wearing his white helmet and flight suit, strap on the completed RB-2000.

Suitor took up his position on the tarmac runway, and the small band of onlookers stood back. Then, at 12.32pm, Suitor released the throttle and lifted into the air on a noisy cloud of steam. He soared in an arc over the sea-lane between the runways, creating a huge spray of water beneath him. He reached a speed of 65 miles per hour and an altitude of 30 feet. Then he landed, on tiptoes, having completed a perfect flight of the 'Pretty Bird'. Now he had proved this bird could fly.

'We all jumped up and down and screamed,' said Barker. 'We were pretty pleased.'

Suitor made two further test flights of the RB-2000 that afternoon, but they were somewhat less successful.

'On the last flight he came in a little too hard,' said Barker. 'He rolled over and did some damage to the belt.'

'It damn near killed me,' said Suitor. 'That's when I realized it was a disaster waiting to happen.'

Suitor was lucky to escape uninjured. The rocketbelt was less fortunate, although the damage was repairable. For Suitor, the last test flight highlighted the design problems and reliability flaws he had spotted in

the RB-2000. Even Suitor, with years of experience as a rocketbelt pilot, found the RB-2000 difficult to master.

'The RB-2000 had a mind of its own,' said Suitor. 'It weighed over 140 pounds fuelled, and was not easy to carry. The corset was very uncomfortable, and the controls were difficult to move with finesse. It was more like flying a truck with a steering problem.'

Despite these teething troubles, the Rocketbelt 2000 worked. But building the rocketbelt was only the first step. The next step was to make money. It was time to take the RB-2000 into the public domain and set up some paid demonstrations. So Barker and Wright set about repairing the belt, and, within a few months, it was ready to fly for payment.

The RB-2000's first public flight took place at the Houston Ship Canal in June 1995 at a media party organized by Houston Mayor Bob Lanier. The party was thrown in honor of the Houston Rockets basketball team - it had just won the National Basketball Association championship by beating the Orlando Magic. The flight booking was set up by Wright with the assistance of the brother of his former business partner, Bryan Galton. Mayor Lanier's office paid Barker and Wright's newly-named American Flying Belt company \$10,000 for the demonstration. Barker and Wright paid Bill Suitor \$2,500 to fly the rocketbelt.

Suitor was to take off from a barge on the canal, and Barker and Wright helped him prepare, wearing promotional T-shirts saying 'American Flying Belt. Believe it!' It was early evening, and the setting sun provided an orange glow to the rippling surface of the canal. Police launches darted up and down the waterway, and fireboats sprayed colored water into the air. At the canal side, a slight breeze whipped at rows of flags and balloons, and hundreds of spectators leaned over railings to get a better view.

Barker strapped Suitor into the belt and asked, 'Too tight?'

'Well, my liver's over here somewhere,' said Suitor, pointing to his chest, 'but that's okay.'

Barker checked his watch, pulled on his protective headphones, and stepped out of the way. Suitor gave the rocketbelt a quick test blast. Then, after a moment of silence, he fired the belt up. To the delight of the pointing crowds, Suitor took off from the barge on a cloud of steam and soared up over the canal, passing a banner reading 'Houston Lighting & Power Salutes The Rockets'. He flew over yachts, with the Loop 610 Bridge behind him, before banking over a group of journalists and making a safe landing in a roped-off area.

It was a perfect flight - for all but one inquisitive TV cameraman. That one member of the large press gathering ducked under safety ropes and strayed into the landing area. He captured some great footage of the rocketbelt coming in to land over his head, but he hadn't bargained for the painfully loud noise from the device's exhausts. Incapacitated by the din, he dropped his camera onto the concrete.

'Then the asshole tried to sue me for hearing loss and damage to the camera,' said Suitor. 'Luckily, the Mayor of Houston called the TV station on my behalf and told them to get the jerk to drop the suit.'

Thankfully, everyone else present seemed to thoroughly enjoy the flight.

'It was nice to see the reaction on everybody's face,' said Barker. 'It was a fun time.'

Barker and Wright helped Suitor remove the belt, and packed it away into Barker's trailer. Then Barker drove away. The first commercial flight of the RB-2000 had been a success. This is what the belt had been designed for - to be flown at paid-for demonstrations. But the public would never see the RB-2000 again. After the Houston Rockets flight, the Rocketbelt 2000 disappeared.

By the time the RB-2000 had completed its first and only public demonstration, Bill Suitor was sick of the whole affair. He had originally planned to fly the belt regularly, but soon changed his mind. He had been living and working with Barker and Wright during the testing of the belt, and the tensions and conflicts between the pair and Larry Stanley had become apparent, and were simply too much to bear. He returned home to Youngstown, and spent much of his time restoring classic cars. The rocketman was now officially retired.

The charges resulting from the hammer attack at Car Audio Plus hung over Larry Stanley and Brad Barker for months. Stanley, now acting as Chief Executive Officer for a technology company called the Microjet Corporation, didn't turn up in court. Instead, knowing Barker would be otherwise engaged, he drove to Car Audio Plus with some friends - including two Harris County detectives - and kicked down the office door in an attempt to retrieve some of the rocketbelt equipment. Then Joe Wright arrived at the scene brandishing the lien paperwork, and the detectives instructed Stanley to leave the equipment. Stanley left empty-handed.

The assault charges against Stanley were eventually dropped, but Barker wasn't so fortunate. He was convicted of Class A Misdemeanor

Assault in Harris County Criminal Court Number 11 in December 1995. He was given a suspended sentence of one year in jail plus 80 hours of community service. This was reduced on appeal to a suspended sentence of six months.

In the months that followed, Stanley continued to search for the RB-2000, which had not resurfaced since the Houston public flight. Stanley had seen footage of the flight on a television news broadcast, and that had only increased his desire to reclaim the belt. He had watched the smiling Barker and Wright setting up the RB-2000 and then, for the first time, he had watched the belt fly through the air so impressively. The device he had helped to create worked spectacularly well, and Stanley was determined that Barker would not benefit from it.

Stanley was convinced that the RB-2000 was still in Barker's possession, but its actual whereabouts was unknown. Indeed, Barker himself had also disappeared. He was rumored to be working on another flying machine project, but no one seemed to know where this work was taking place. One thing that was certain was that Barker had not exploited the interest in the rocketbelt generated by the Houston flight. He had resisted booking further lucrative flights, such was his desire to keep the belt out of sight, and out of Stanley's reach.

Stanley continued to pursue Barker through the courts. His civil lawsuit regarding the ownership of the rocketbelt suffered a succession of major hold-ups that continued for almost two years. During long months of legal wrangles, Stanley accused Barker, Joe Wright, and Jonette Anderson of delaying their pre-trial depositions to avoid having to testify under oath. Barker missed his deposition date several times, and was eventually threatened with jail if he didn't show up. According to Stanley, when Barker did eventually show up, his deposition was contradictory and unreliable. Stanley claimed Barker gave the court the address of a Houston motel as his permanent residence, and then checked out on the following day. Joe Wright admitted in his deposition that proper notice had not been given for Duratron's purchase of ARB's assets. Jonette Anderson claimed attorney-client confidence and refused to answer any questions. Trial was eventually set for 27 July 1998.

While the pre-trial activity continued, Joe Wright's car stereo shop went bust. Business at Car Audio Plus had dropped off. New cars were coming off the production lines fitted with state-of-the-art stereo systems, meaning drivers were less likely to purchase upgrades. Similarly, factory-fitted security features meant car alarms were less popular, and

car phones had been superseded by cell phones. Wright had continually strengthened Car Audio Plus by plowing his profits back into the business, but his involvement with Barker and Stanley had diverted the profits away from the business and into the rocketbelt. Wright estimated that he had lost around \$100,000 on the RB-2000 project. He filed for bankruptcy and set about selling the shop's inventory to cover his bills. Wright's dream of running his own business had turned into a nightmare. There was now no way back for the shop or Joe Wright.

Around the same time, Barker and Wright fell out. They had been close friends for over ten years, and the reason for their falling out was unclear. It might have been down to Wright's admittance in court that the Duratron's purchase of ARB's assets had not been fair, or it could have been as the result of a personal disagreement. Barker and Wright had been seen arguing at the workshop, with employees blaming Barker's volatile temper. And Barker had a track record of falling out with friends. With the rocketbelt completed and in his possession, perhaps Barker felt he had no further need for Wright and his workshop. And Wright could not have been happy that the rocketbelt had been removed from the shop despite the effort and cash he had invested. So another friendship was wrecked - but the broken friendship was the least of Wright's worries.

Car Audio Plus finally closed its doors in February 1998. Understandably, there was a change in Wright's formerly sunny disposition. His money was gone, and a lot of his former friends deserted him. Wright spent much of his time sitting in front of his computer, trying to come up with new business ideas. He was very organized, and kept files on everyone and everything on his hard drive. But those files showed Wright was behind on his house payments. And the house was all he had left. He was in an increasingly desperate situation, and sought solace in booze and crystal meth - a powerful form of amphetamine. Wright had fallen hard, and was fast becoming a broken man. The last thing he needed was Larry Stanley's impending lawsuit.

Around the time the audio shop closed, Stanley and Wright began to communicate via a mutual friend. Stanley wanted Wright to help him find the rocketbelt, and Wright wanted Stanley to remove him from the lawsuit. As part of a court-ordered mediation process, Stanley and Wright arranged to meet, along with their attorneys.

'We knew Joe Wright held the key to the rocketbelt,' said Stanley's civil attorney Michael Von Blon. 'Joe had indicated he was willing to help. I

don't think he knew exactly where the rocketbelt was, but he indicated he could get us information that would lead us to it.'

According to Stanley, Wright revealed that the rocketbelt was still in the possession of Brad Barker, and that it was located somewhere in North Harris County. Stanley and Von Blon agreed to release Wright from the lawsuit if and when the RB-2000 was recovered, and give him a piece of the rocketbelt business.

'I detected a strong fear in Joe's eyes when he discussed this,' said Stanley, 'and he expressed a great concern that if Barker found that he was negotiating with me he would kill or severely injure him.'

In a further meeting Wright asked Stanley for \$10,000 immediately upon recovery of the rocketbelt. Wright planned to leave town. It seemed a sensible thing to do. The Houston dream was over. He had already telephoned his family in Michigan to tell them he would be visiting in August.

'He wanted money up front to get on the road,' said Von Blon.

Stanley claimed Wright's desire to leave town was fuelled by fear. According to Stanley, Wright 'believed Barker would kill him for telling the truth.'

The deal between Stanley and Wright was to be finalized in a meeting at the Houston Greenway Plaza office of Wright's attorney, Ronald Bass, on Wednesday 15 July 1998. Stanley, Von Blon, and Bass all arrived on time for the 6pm meeting, but there was no sign of Wright. At 6.15pm, Bass telephoned Wright at home. Wright said he was ill and unable to attend, so it was agreed the meeting would proceed with Wright on a speakerphone. There were doubts about Wright's reasons for staying away, and neither Stanley nor Von Blon believed the excuse of illness.

'Joe wanted to help,' said Von Blon, 'but he was scared to death of Barker. Don't forget, Barker had attacked my client with a hammer.'

'I believe Wright was just terrified of being seen by Barker with me,' said Stanley.

According to Stanley, during the course of the meeting, Wright said Barker was a 'psycho' who belonged in a 'little orange suit'. Stanley agreed to pay off the \$2,000 mortgage repayment debt on Wright's house, and additionally pay Wright a total of \$10,000 upon recovery of the belt. The agreement was drawn up and deemed acceptable by all parties. The meeting ended amicably, and all involved seemed pleased with the outcome.

'I congratulated Joe,' said Stanley, 'and everyone felt like we had reached our goal. Now all that was needed was for Joe to find the rocket-belt for us.'

Stanley and Wright swapped email addresses, and Wright emailed Stanley at 11pm to establish contact.

'I sent him a rather lengthy reply,' said Stanley, 'congratulating him and encouraging him that the future was promising, and suggesting he might be able to help in sales and marketing. I never received a reply.'

Indeed, there would be no further communication at all between Larry Stanley and Joe Wright. Despite Stanley's hopes, and a turnover order signed by the Judge demanding the device be present in court during the trial, Wright never located the rocketbelt. Wright spoke to a friend on the telephone at 11am on the following morning, Thursday 16 July. He was never heard from again.

Three days later, at 3.30pm on Sunday 19 July 1998, officers from the Sheriff's Department were called to Wright's Northwest Harris County home. A friend of Wright, Maurice Heimlich, had found the front door of the house standing ajar, and entered to find a lifeless body lying in a pool of blood on the carpet of the master bedroom. The body had been beaten beyond recognition. The head and torso were completely destroyed. It was impossible to identify the deceased at the scene. It was difficult even to determine whether the body was that of a man or a woman.

Two days later, the Harris County Sheriff's Department were able to make an identification via dental records. Joe Wright was dead. He was 37 years old.

# Chapter 4

## The Kidnapping

In November 1999, Brad Barker began to receive messages from a Hollywood stuntman named Chris Wentzel. Chris 'The Flying Wizard' Wentzel specialized in airborne stunts, and had featured in a bunch of not very successful movies, the biggest of which was 1992's *Poison Ivy*, starring Drew Barrymore. Wentzel said he wanted to offer Barker a three-day movie job in the desert near Los Angeles, filming the controlled crash of an airliner, and paying around \$1,500. Wentzel's messages were passed to Barker via a mutual acquaintance named Stan Casad. Wentzel had met Casad, who worked within the shady fringes of the medical industry, while hunting for treasure some years previously.

Barker, who had only been out of prison for a few days, wasn't particularly keen to take the job, but he did need the money. He had also, of course, held an interest in movie work ever since watching his friend Kinnie Gibson become a Hollywood stuntman. Barker was still on bail following his release, so he called his bail bondsmen, J&J Bonding in Fort Smith, and left a message to inform them that he was heading to Los Angeles for work and would be back in a few days. On 26 November, Barker left Arkansas and travelled to California.

Almost as soon as Barker had crossed the state line, Larry Stanley began to call J&J Bonding. He told the company that Barker was jumping bond and planning to leave the country for Venezuela. Stanley also persuaded a Fort Smith Sheriff's Deputy and Detectives from Harris County to warn the bond company that Barker was absconding.

Unaware of the furor back in Arkansas, Barker landed in Los Angeles and was met at the airport by Wentzel, a short, stocky man with a thick neck and short dark hair. Wentzel took Barker out for a meal, and the pair then took a ride on Wentzel's boat, before heading back to his North Hollywood home. Outside the small white house stood two men Barker didn't recognize.

'These are the guys you'll be working with in the desert,' said Wentzel.

Barker introduced himself, and all four men went inside. They sat at a kitchen table and chatted for around 15 minutes. The atmosphere was extremely friendly, and Barker began to look forward to working with the men.

Then Wentzel pulled out a gun and pointed it straight at Barker's head.

Thinking Wentzel was kidding around, Barker smiled. 'I thought it was a joke,' he said. 'I wasn't being cocky or anything, but when I smiled it scared the shit out of Chris Wentzel.'

Scared or not, Wentzel erupted in fury. It immediately became clear that he wasn't joking. 'Get that son of a bitch on the ground!' he yelled. One of the other men grabbed Barker in a chokehold and threw him to the kitchen floor. 'The last time I put a gun to somebody's head and they smiled at me,' said Wentzel, 'I knew they were crazy or they just didn't give a shit.'

Barker stopped smiling. 'At that point I realized it was serious,' he said. Within seconds, a convivial meeting between co-workers had transformed into a terrifying violent encounter. But why? Barker was sure he had not said or done anything to upset these men. So why was he being held down on the kitchen floor with a firearm pressed to his head?

Wentzel stood over Barker, brandishing the gun. 'Where's the rocket-belt?' he demanded.

Barker was shocked. What did the rocketbelt have to do with any of this? Chris Wentzel had no involvement whatsoever with the RB-2000. As far as he was aware, Wentzel did not even know the rocketbelt existed. Then he had a sudden realization.

'So Larry Stanley's behind this,' Barker said.

'Don't know him,' said Wentzel. 'Never heard of him.'

Then Wentzel and the others set about tying Barker up. The men wrenched Barker's arms behind his back and fixed him in handcuffs. Then they sat on his legs and tied them together with rope. They pulled him into a seating position, and Wentzel pressed the gun to the back of Barker's head.

'Did you kill Joe Wright?' asked Wentzel.

'No,' said Barker.

'Where's the rocketbelt?' said Wentzel.

'I don't have it,' Barker answered.

The interrogation continued for several hours. Wentzel was determined Barker would confess to killing Joe Wright and give up the whereabouts of the rocketbelt. Eventually, Barker admitted that he did know where the rocketbelt was located. He said a friend was holding it as collateral in a loan he had taken, but he refused to say any more. Then Barker had a hood duct-taped over his head, and was carried into another room. There he was pushed into a small white wooden box, around three feet high and four feet long, with the words 'SCUBA TANKS' stenciled on the side.

'Watch your fucking head, bad boy,' said Wentzel as he pushed a lid over the box, forcing Barker down into the cramped box. Then Barker heard the sound of a power drill. Wentzel was screwing the lid shut.

Barker now found himself handcuffed, tied, hooded, and trapped in the sealed box. And he would remain there for several days. The Rocketbelt 2000 had been meant to allow Barker to soar through the air like a bird. Now his involvement with the device had left him caged in a wooden box. The RB-2000 had caused broken friendships, violent confrontations, accusations of murder, a multi-million dollar lawsuit, and now a very odd kidnapping. Surely Barker was now beginning to regret ever deciding to build a rocketbelt.

Each day, Wentzel quizzed Barker about the whereabouts of the RB-2000. Wentzel told Barker they would kill him, and harm his son, unless he complied. 'I know exactly where your son lives, and I'll go get him and tie his little ass up in the box with you,' he said. Wentzel also asked Barker, menacingly, if he was scared of rats or snakes. The interrogation continued relentlessly, but Barker said nothing. He figured the men were going to kill him anyway, and the only thing keeping him alive was the fact that they needed information from him. He wasn't just trying to protect the whereabouts of the rocketbelt. He was trying to stay alive.

Barker spent his time in the box trying to figure out what was going on. His captors wanted the rocketbelt, and they also wanted him to admit to killing Joe Wright. It was obvious that the job offer had been a ruse to lure him out to Hollywood. But what was the connection between Wentzel, the rocketbelt, and Wright? It seemed that Wentzel was receiving instructions and questions via email. Who else was involved? Wentzel had named Barker's son, and correctly stated where he lived, but Barker had never mentioned his son to Wentzel. Where did

Wentzel get that information from? Barker was convinced that Larry Stanley was somehow mixed up in this, although Wentzel had denied that was the case. So who were the emails from? And why did Wentzel constantly refer to Barker as 'bad boy'?

During one interrogation, a desperate Barker suggested Wentzel call in Kinnie Gibson to mediate. Wentzel related this request to the mystery emailer, who responded with the message: 'Bad boy suggests we get Gibson involved? Since Gibson is the stunt double for a Hollywood tough guy, maybe little bad boy hopes Gibson will come out here and rescue him from the big bad men holding him.' The emailer also threatened to force his way with a gun into the home of the person who was holding the rocketbelt in an attempt to capture the device.

At one point in his ordeal, during which he lost all track of time, Barker was pulled from the box with the hood still taped over his head and moved to another room.

'My friend Jim is helping me today, bad boy,' Wentzel said of a second captor. All Barker could see through a gap in the hood was that Jim was wearing white tennis shoes.

Barker was carried into Wentzel's garage, but if he thought his nightmare was coming to an end he was to be sorely disappointed. His captors dragged the empty scuba tank box into the garage, picked Barker up, and stuffed him back inside. They pushed him down and reattached the lid with the power drill. But after they had screwed it down, Barker could still hear the sound of the drill. They were drilling holes in the box.

'Is that enough holes?' asked Jim, in a vaguely familiar voice.

'No,' said Wentzel. 'The more holes, the faster it'll sink.'

Barker began to weep. It seemed his captors were planning to dump him in the ocean.

'Please,' he begged. 'Let me out!'

'Shut the fuck up,' said Wentzel. 'We're going for a little boat ride.'

'Please, Chris!' cried Barker, 'I don't want to drown. Would you give me a minute to say a prayer, and then put a bullet in my head?'

'Sure,' said Wentzel. 'No problem.'

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